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**DEAN  
KOONITZ**



**THE KEY TO  
MIDNIGHT**

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# THE KEY TO MIDNIGHT

Dean Koontz

headline

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Life has no meaning except in terms  
of responsibility.  
—*Faith and History*, Reinhold Niebuhr

Now take my hand and hold it tight.  
I will not fail you here tonight,  
For failing you, I fail myself  
And place my soul upon a shelf  
In Hell's library without light.  
I will not fail you here tonight.  
—*The Book of Counted Sorrows*

# PART ONE

## JOANNA

A sound of something;

The scarecrow

Has fallen down of itself.

Boncho, 1670-1714

### 1

In the dark, Joanna Rand went to the window. Naked trembling, she peered between the wooden slats of the blind.

Wind from the distant mountains pressed coldly against the glass and rattled a loose pane.

At four o'clock in the morning, the city of Kyoto was quiet, even in Gion, the entertainment quarter crowded with nightclubs and geisha houses. Kyoto, the spiritual heart of Japan, was a thousand years old yet as new as a fresh idea: a fascinating hodgepodge of neon signs and ancient temples, plastic gimcrackery and beautifully hand-carved stone, the worst of modern architecture thrusting up next to palaces and ornate shrines that were weathered by centuries of hot, damp summers and cold, damp winters. By a mysterious combination of tradition and popular culture, the metropolis renewed her sense of humanity's permanence and purpose, refreshed her sometimes shaky belief in the importance of the individual.

The earth revolves around the sun; society continuously changes; the city grows; new generations come forth ... and I'll go on just as they do.

That was always a comforting thought when she was in darkness, alone, unable to sleep, morbidly energized by the powerful yet indefinable fear that came to her every night.

Calmed somewhat but not anxious to go to bed, Joanna dressed in a red silk robe and slippers. Her slender hands were still shaking, but the tremors were not as severe as they had been.

She felt violated, used, and discarded - as though the hateful creature in her nightmare had assumed a real physical form and had repeatedly, brutally raped her while she'd slept.

The man with the steel fingers reaches for the hypodermic syringe...

That single image was all that she retained from the nightmare. It had been so vivid that she could recall it at will, in unsettling detail: the smooth texture of those metal fingers, the clicking and whirring of gears working in them, the gleam of light off the robotic knuckles.

She switched on the bedside lamp and studied the familiar room. Nothing was out of place. The air contained only familiar scents. Yet she wondered if she truly had been alone all night.

She shivered.

Joanna stepped out of the narrow stairwell into her ground-floor office. She switched on the light and studied the room as she had inspected those upstairs, half expecting the fear-some phantom of her dream to be waiting somewhere in the real world. The soft glow from the porcelain lamp didn't reach every corner. Purple shadows draped the book-shelves, the rosewood furniture, and the rice-paper scroll paintings. Potted palms cast complex, lacy shadows across one wall. Everything was in order.

Unfinished paperwork littered the desk, but she wasn't in a bookkeeping frame of mind. She needed a drink.

The outer door of the office opened on the carpeted area that encircled the long cocktail bar at one end of the Moonglow Lounge. The club wasn't completely dark: Two low-wattage security lights glowed above the smoky blue mirrors behind the bar and made the beveled edges of the glass gleam like the blades of well-stropped knives. An eerie green bulb marked each of the four exits. Beyond the bar stools, in the main room, two hundred chairs at sixty tables faced a small stage. The nightclub was silent, deserted.

Joanna went behind the bar, took a glass from the rack, and poured a double shot of Dry Sack over ice. She sipped the sherry, sighed - and became aware of movement near the open door to her office.

Mariko Inamura, the assistant manager, had come down-stairs from the apartment that she occupied on the third floor, above Joanna's quarters. As modest as always, Mariko wore a bulky green bathrobe that hung to the floor and was two sizes too large for her; lost in all that quilted fabric, she seemed less a woman than a waif. Her black hair, usually held up by ivory pins, now spilled to her shoulders. She went to the bar and sat on one of the stools.

"Like a drink?" Joanna asked.

Mariko smiled. "Water would be nice, thank you."

"Have something stronger."

"No, thank you. Just water, please."

"Trying to make me feel like a lush?"

"You aren't a lush."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Joanna said. "But I wonder. I seem to wind up here at the bar more nights than not, around this time." She put a glass of ice water on the counter.

Mariko turned the glass slowly in her small hands, but she didn't drink from it.

Joanna admired the woman's natural grace, which transformed every ordinary act into a moment of theater. Mariko was thirty, two years younger than Joanna, with big, dark eyes and delicate features. She seemed to be unaware of her exceptional good looks, and her humility enhanced her beauty.

Mariko had come to work at the Moonglow Lounge one week after opening night. She'd wanted the job as much for the opportunity to practice her English with Joanna as for the salary. She'd made it clear that she intended to leave after a year or two, to obtain a position as an executive secretary with one of the larger American companies with a branch office in Tokyo. But six years later, she no longer found Tokyo appealing, at least not by comparison with the life she now enjoyed.

The Moonglow had worked its spell on Mariko too. It was the main interest of her life as surely as it was the only interest in Joanna's.

Strangely, the insular world of the club was in some ways as sheltering and safe as a Zen monastery high in a remote mountain pass. Nightly, the place was crowded with customers, yet the outside world did not intrude to any significant extent. When the employees went home and the doors closed, the lounge - with its blue lights, mirrored walls, silver-and-black art deco appointments, and appealing air of mystery - might have been in any country, in any decade since the 1930s. It might even have been a place in a dream. Both Joanna and Mariko seemed to need that peculiar sanctuary.

Besides, an unexpected sisterly affection and concern had developed between them. Neither made friends easily. Mariko was warm and charming - but still surprisingly shy for a woman who worked in a Gion nightclub. In part she was like the retiring, soft-spoken, self-effacing Japanese women of another and less democratic age. By contrast, Joanna was vivacious, outgoing - yet she also found it difficult to permit that extra degree of closeness that allowed an acquaintance to become a friend. Therefore, she'd made a special effort to keep Mariko at the Moonglow, regularly increasing her responsibilities and her salary; Mariko had reciprocated by working hard and diligently. Without once discussing their quiet friendship, they had decided that separation was neither desirable nor necessary.

Now, not for the first time, Joanna wondered, Why Mariko?

Of all the people whom Joanna might have chosen for a friend, Mariko was not the obvious first choice - except that she had an unusually strong sense of privacy and considerable discretion even by Japanese standards. She would never press for details from a friend's past, never indulge in that gossipy, inquisitive, and revelatory chatter that so many people assumed was an essential part of friendship.

There's never a danger that she'll try to find out too much about me.

That thought surprised Joanna. She didn't understand herself. After all, she had no secrets, no past of which to be ashamed.

With the glass of dry sherry in her hand, Joanna came out from behind the bar and sat on a stool.

"You had a nightmare again," Mariko said.

"Just a dream."

"A nightmare," Mariko quietly insisted. "The same one you've had a thousand other nights."

"Not a thousand," Joanna demurred.

"Two thousand? Three?"

"Did I wake you?"

"It sounded worse than ever," Mariko said.

"Just the usual."

"Thought I'd left the TV on."

"Oh?"

"Thought I was hearing some old Godzilla movie," Mariko said.

Joanna smiled. "All that screaming, huh?"

"Like Tokyo being smashed flat again, mobs running for their lives."

"All right, it was a nightmare, not just a dream. And worse than usual."

"I worry about you," Mariko said.

"No need to worry. I'm a tough girl."

"You saw him again ... the man with the steel fingers?"

"I never see his face," Joanna said wearily. "I've never seen anything at all but his hand, those god-awful metal fingers. Or at least that's all I remember seeing. I guess there's more to the nightmare than that, but the rest of it never stays with me after I wake up." She shuddered and sipped some sherry.

Mariko put a hand on Joanna's shoulder, squeezed gently. "I have an uncle who is"

“A hypnotist.”

“Psychiatrist,” Mariko said. “A doctor. He uses hypnotism only to”

“Yes, Mariko-san, you’ve told me about him before. I’m really not interested.”

“He could help you remember the entire dream. He might even be able to help you learn the cause of it.”

Joanna stared at her own reflection in the blue bar mirror and finally said, “I don’t think I ever want to know the cause of it.”

They were silent for a while.

Eventually Mariko said, “I didn’t like it when they made him into a hero.”

Joanna frowned. “Who?”

“Godzilla. Those later movies, when he battles other monsters to protect Japan. So silly. We need our monsters to be scary. They don’t do us any good if they don’t frighten us.”

“Am I about to get hit with some philosophy of the mysterious East? I didn’t hear the Zen warning siren.”

“Sometimes we need to be frightened,” Mariko said.

Joanna softly imitated a submarine diving alarm: “Whoop-whoop-whoop-whoop.”

“Sometimes fear purges us, Joanna-san.”

“We’re deep in the unfathomable waters of the Japanese mind,” Joanna whispered theatrically.

Mariko continued unfazed: “But when we confront our demons”

“Deeper and deeper in the Japanese mind, tremendous pressure building up”

“and rid ourselves of those demons”

“deeper and deeper”

“we don’t need the fear any more”

“the weight of sudden enlightenment will crush me as though I’m just a bug”

“don’t need it to purge us”